More than a Name: An Etymological Journey of the Hospital Corps

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"Hospital Corpsmen" is more than a name for an enlisted medical specialist. Becoming a Hospital Corpsman takes rigorous training, meeting personnel qualification standards and proficiency in the core competencies. This was a fact known even before the Hospital Corps was formally established on June 17th, 1898.

When Navy Surgeon General J. Rufus Tryon first advocated for a Hospital Corps in 1893, he recognized that medical sailors aboard ship and at shore stations needed requisite skills and tools necessary for their trade. For Tryon, the naval hospital was the chief training platform for inculcating prospective corpsmen, hence the name "Hospital Corps."

In 1898, the Navy organized its loose conglomeration of apothecaries, medical attendants and purveyors into three enlisted rates (hospital steward, hospital apprentice first class, and hospital apprentice) and a warrant grade (pharmacist). Since then all who have served under the banner of this corps have been known by the moniker "Hospital Corpsmen" or simply "Corpsmen."

All hospital corpsmen both past and present can tell you that tradition holds great importance to their corps. The Hospital Corps is the largest occupational enlisted rating and most highly decorated enlisted rate in the U.S. Navy. Stories abound of hospital corpsmen's heroic and selfless actions on the battlefields of Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Khe Sanh and Fallujah. To date, Hospital Corpsmen have been the recipients of 22 Medals of Honor, 199 Navy Crosses and some 984 Silver Stars.

As well-known as the stories of service and sacrifice is the tradition of the corps' origins – any corpsman today can tell you that the seeds of the Hospital Corps were planted long before 1898.

Aboard the Navy's first sailing vessels launched in the Quasi-War with France were the curiously named "loblolly boys." Among them was John Wall of Alexandria, Virginia, who reported aboard USS Constellation on June 1, 1798 and served aboard the ship during her engagement with the French frigate L'Insurgente in February 1799. In the following years other loblolly boys appeared on the Navy's rolls among them African-American sailor Joseph Anderson aboard USS Eagle (1800), Alexander Wood aboard USS Essex (1802), and John Dormyn aboard USS Philadelphia (1803).

Although "loblolly boy" may seem like a less-than-flattering appellation today, the name was a carry-over from the British Royal Navy. The word is derived from "lob" meaning "to bubble and boil" and "lolly" meaning "broth or soup." The term loblolly was associated with a porridge or thick gruel and loblolly boys like John Wall administered this form of nourishment to the sick and injured. In those first years of the U.S. Navy, the loblolly boy name was also used interchangeably with "waister" (so named for the location of the ship where patients were treated AKA, "the waist") and "hospital mates" at medical facilities ashore.

The Navy officially adopted "Loblolly Boy" as a rate in 1814. And the United States Navy Regulations of 1818 first identified the job duties of a loblolly boy. They included:
• Ringing a small bell "fore and aft the gun berth decks" to notify the crew of sick call.
• Filling a small washtub with sand to receive the blood during any operation, and prevent the deck of the cockpit

(location of the sickbay) from being bloodied.
• Ensuring that the surgeon has all necessary provisions and hospital stores for treating the sick and injured.

Although the Navy never officially disestablished the loblolly boy name the term faded from use and was superseded by "surgeon steward" at sea and "hospital steward" at naval hospitals beginning in the 1840s. "Surgeon" was the originally name for Navy physicians, all of whom in the days of the sailing ship were expected to perform surgery at sea. The word "steward" defined the scope of these enlisted sailors—i.e., "kept the medical journal, compounded and dispensed drugs, applied bandages, and performed the operation of cupping and leeching." Aboard brigs and schooners, surgeon stewards were the second most senior enlisted rank after master-at-arms.

Beginning on June 16, 1861, surgeon stewards were joined by the new enlisted rate "nurse." Like surgeon stewards, nurses were enlisted sailors designated for medical service by the commanding officer of the vessel upon the recommendation of the senior surgeon. As the profession of nursing was still in development in the United States these shipboard "nurses" did not have any formalized training but rather were sailors designated for attending to the infirm. Naval vessels with a complement of 200 or less were allotted one nurse, while ships with over 200 were allotted two designated nurses. Four Navy surgeon stewards and two nurses were among the 2,112 sailors killed in action during the Civil War.

The position of surgeon steward was superseded by "apothecary" per Navy circular order of December 8, 1866 and organized into three rates (apothecary first class, apothecary second class and apothecary third class). Apothecaries were specialized senior enlisted required to have some pharmacy training. In 1896—52 years before Navy Hospital Corpsmen first wore the caduceus—apothecaries were the first sailors to wear this symbol as a rating badge. When the hospital corps was established, enlisted apothecaries were elevated to warrant officer "pharmacists." Twenty-five apothecaries were appointed as warrant officers in September 1898, some like Cornelius O'Leary of Ireland—the patriarch of the Hospital Corps—was already a 37-year veteran of the service at that point.

In 1873, enlisted nurses were redesignated "baymen." In all likelihood the name was referred to the place on the ship where they practiced their trade—i.e., the sick bay. Like their predecessors, baymen were designated for this role from ship's command. Two baymen were among those killed in the February 1898 explosion of USS Maine in Havana Harbor. And during the Spanish-American War, five baymen assigned the First Marine Battalion in Guantanamo represented some of the first medical sailors embedded with the Marines. The bayman was superseded by the enlisted grades hospital steward, hospital apprentice first class, and hospital apprentice when the Hospital Corps was established.

With one warrant officer and three enlisted rates, the Hospital Corps of 1898 allowed little room for sailors to advance. On August 29, 1916 the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) reorganized the Hospital Corps into six enlisted rates (chief pharmacist's mate, pharmacist's mate first class, pharmacist's mate second class, pharmacist's mate third class, hospital apprentice first class, and hospital apprentice second class). The name "pharmacist's mate" did not mean these sailors were relegated to roles in the pharmacy. Rather the name denoted that they were subordinate to the pharmacist—much like junior physicians a century earlier served as "surgeon's mates" alongside the more senior "surgeons." Hospital Corpsmen served as pharmacist's mates until 1948 when the Corps was again reorganized and adopted the present-day names, sans "senior" or "master chief." A decade later, in May 1958 the Navy expanded its enlisted rating structure adding the grades of senior chief and master chief petty officer of the Hospital Corps.

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